

COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Helena M. Rijoly

Dosen Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris FKIP
Universitas Pattimura Ambon

Abstract: As an instrument of communication, language (language learning) has ignited many thinkers and researchers to explain its phenomena and process. Theories have been developed to explain what is language and all its characteristic and linguistic systems, the theories of language learning and acquisition and the impact of its application in social setting. Acknowledging the significant impact of language use, one may wonder how do we come about to learn language, what triggers it and how can we improve and develop. This paper will reflect upon the role of input and most importantly the comprehensible input in language acquisition and learning (with a nod to several Krashen's Theories) and put forward some suggestions on how to incorporate comprehensible input in language learning setting.

Keywords : *Comprehensible Input, Language Acquisition and Learning*

Introduction

Communicating is one of the human basic need that once deprived will tip the balance of perceived human quality in a person (Curtis et.al, 1974). Communicating comes in many different forms: language, body language/gestures, sign language, codes etc. The use of language in regards to its characteristics is exclusively human (Sapir, 1921). Language is an agreed and accepted codified system of communicating used in a specific region laden with all the custom and social values. Crystal (1989) affirms this when he emphasize that language

is used systematically and conventionally by a community for purposes of communication. The keywords here are 'agreed' and 'accepted'. Because language is used to communicate or convey message, the language input and output must be comprehensible to both (or more) parties. The state of comprehensibility can only be achieved if there is an accepted system meaning of spoken, written or signed (Emmit and Polock, 1997). This comprehensibility system may be different from one area or region to the other

Many theories have been put forward to explain the phenomena and process of language acquisition and learning such as behaviorism theory by Skinner, Innatism by Chomsky, Monitoring and Input by Krashen etc. However, the nature of language acquisition and learning is broad and abstract whereas language itself is still to support second language learning.

Input in Language Acquisition And Learning

Input in language learning is an exposure or a stimulus that learners have to authentic language in use. Comprehensible input entails that students need to have a sense of understanding of the exposure or stimuli presented to them. Comprehensible input does not operate on the exact level of student's knowledge let alone below it (Krashen in Lightbown and Spada, 2011). Comprehensible input provides exposure and stimuli slightly above their current level of understanding. The objective is more on liberating the language learning from focusing on learning about the language and instead focuses on learning in the language. J.Lee and B. VanPatten (2003) illustrate input as

finding a way to describe it as whole. This paper would like to argue that on the basis of all language acquisition theories there is a fundamental need of comprehensible input. In the end, this paper will try to list suggested strategies to use in making sure that the input is comprehensible thus

fuel to cars and motorcycle which without it, the cars or motorcycle cannot run. Furthermore, what kind of fuel you put into your car or motorcycle will determine the quality of your journey. Good oil will make sure a smooth journey and prolonged maintenance of your cars or motorcycle while bad oil will sure to create problems for your engine. Children who receive proper input (stimulus) on language will develop better in his/her linguistic and communicative skills. The case of Genie, the feral child (Curtis et.al, 1974) is an extreme example of none or very bad language stimuli which resulted in the deprivation of her language acquisition.

This brings us back to Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory (1985) which he argues that language can only be learned if the input is comprehensible. Schutz (2014) on his online web on Stephen Krashen's theory of Comprehensible Input (CI) defines it as "the target language that the learner would not be able to produce but can still understand".

So what do we mean when we talk about input and in particular comprehensible input in this paper? The term input and comprehensible input take us to two similar but not the same paths. Input per se refer to "what is put in, taken in, or operated by any process or system" (GoogleTranslate). Communication is a process of

receiving and processing input to production of message equally comprehensible to others. The input may be in terms of words gestures, symbols or other agreed meaning. Comprehensible input is a theory coined by Krashen which signify an input that is slightly above the understandable level of the students/language learner thus to push them beyond their level of understanding and acquire a sense of understood meaning (though they are yet able to explain it metalinguistically). This paper lays the foundation on both of this terms where it will see input that is meaningful and comprehensible as well as the input that placed slightly higher than their level of understanding to boost a leap in language learning.

Comprehensible Input in Language Acquisition

One of the joyous and momentous moments of parenthood is the child's first comprehensible word. It is a milestone that every child in the world will pass on a certain age. All normal children, regardless of culture, develop language at roughly the same time, along much of the same schedule (Yule 1996, p. 176). First language is

said to be acquired instead of being learned. Krashen defines *acquiring* as a subconscious matter and *learning* as the opposite. Language Learning is a conscious process of building knowledge of the language. Baby or toddler – those in the normal speaking phase – begins speaking in comprehensible manner not through a taught

session but more through immersions and exposure to the use of language around him/her. The baby or toddler notices a specific sound which is acceptable to refer to a certain nouns or actions. For example, the baby will say 'atl' pointing or motioning to the milk bottle. Adult around the baby or toddler reacts in affirmation and giving the milk bottle. This reaction is stored as comprehensible communication meaningful to the baby and the people around him/her. Later in life, this process develops into sentence structure and sequences. This is an example of acquiring or language acquisition. In school, we are taught the grammar use and other aspects of language. This according to Krashen is a conscious learning (YouTube Clip, 1982). We are taught to pay attention and apply certain rules pertaining to the language learned. Thus, our brain is trained in processing and to abide these rules to make sense in communicating or in another word to be comprehensible to other. In the case of Second language, the term acquisition and learning are used interchangeably just as the child later stage of first

language where natural acquisition is enhanced with the learning of the language aspects and rules.

Krashen stated "We acquire language in one way and only one way, when we received a comprehensible input" (YouTube Clip, 1982). Thus in first language acquisition (L1) or second language acquisition (L2), language processing can only make sense when the input is comprehensible. In L1, this process of making sense of language input is aided by Chomsky theory of *Universal Grammar (UG)*. Chomsky developed an Innatist view as a challenge to the Behaviourist View (Skinner in 1957) which argues that language learning takes place through stimulus-response-reinforcement that led to habit formation (Lightbown and Spada 2011). Merriam Webster dictionary defines Innate as:¹ Existing in, belonging to, or determined by factors present in an individual from birth; ² belonging to the essential nature of something; ³ originating in or derived from the mind or the constitution of the intellect rather than from experience.

In his innateness hypothesis, Chomsky argued that children have a natural ‘device’ that enable them to make sense of the linguistic stimulation around them which lead to their comprehension of the message and the proper production of language (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2007, p.319). He also argues that the reason why they can make sense of the linguistic stimulations is because of the existing Universal Grammar that is innate to each and every one of us. Therefore, if you put an Ambonese baby in France, the baby will grow up acquiring the most dominant language around him/her, in this case we can assume it is French. The baby will acquire the sentence structure, lexical recourse and speaking skills to the level of ‘native speaker’ even before they are able to read or write.

Languages are learned continuously throughout our life. L1 is usually fully acquired by the age of 5 – 8 years old while L2 learning is usually happen around the age of 8 – 10 (eq. as school subjects) or later in life (eq. job demand, travelling, higher educa-

tion). However, bilingual children may have simultaneous language acquisition and learning from early age. L1 is usually universal as children all over the world develop language skill around the same schedule as the biologically determined development of motor skills (Yule 1996, p. 176). L1 also can go to the ultimate attainment or native speaker competence. L2 acquisition is varied because it depends of several factors (internal and external) that affect its competence and performance. Krashen proposed the affective filter hypothesis where emotional state and attitudes are adjustable filter that passes or blocks input. Krashen argues that in order for learning to happen, it needs high motivation, high self-confidence and low or zero anxiety. External factors are among others: quality of teachers, opportunities and exposure to the target language (Lightbown and Spada, 2011).

Children acquired their L1 with no prior exposure to language. Nevertheless, they are able to acquire the linguistic skill such as sentence structure, intonation and meanings.

UG provides a basic set of principles that contains parameter. Principles are the properties of all language in the world and parameters are the points where there is a limited choice of setting depending on which specific language is involved (Saville-Troike , p. 47). With this set of principles, children only need to pick up new vocabulary and then apply the syntactic structures from their innate UG to form a sentence. L2 acquisition however is not simple because the existing knowledge of their L1 which can aid or interfere with L2 competence and performance (Lightbown and Spada 2011, p. 30).

Both L1 and L2 acquisition requires practice through trial and error of to grasp the usage of the target language (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2007).The emergence of L1 in children in their early years might be due to the UG but the further development of L1 certainly passes learning stages in order to reach the mastery of a native speaker state. These learning stages include parent and other adult instruction on language use, exposure to the language use in society, technology and school work.

All of these learning add up to the language instinct that each child is born with to enable them to reach a native speaker state. L2 acquisition begins with the cognitive learning of the language that leads to the acquired understanding of the contextual use of the specific language aspect. As the learning advanced L2 learner will find the language become more and more autonomous thus they acquired the mastery of the target language (Saville-Troike 2006, p.73).

Second language is learned through many different approaches. There is no single way, strategy or approach to learn or teach second language because we all have different learning styles (Davies 1989). The learning and teaching of L2 are aimed to make the input comprehensible and meaningful thus it can be retained longer in our memory and can be retrieved into correct use according to context and function. The second language teaching which utilized memorizing will have its output wear off in time. Most of the time memorizing is useful for short-term and specific goals such as passing the test.

Meanwhile, learning a language should have a long term usage for communication. Comprehensible input goes beyond memorizing thus to create memorable, meaningful and comprehensible data which will be stored for later use. The memorable and meaningful aspects refer to the experience in learning and acquiring the word or phrase or language functions. These memories and the understanding of the word created a special meaning which will bond understanding and sense of fit to context for later use. Comprehensible aspect specifically refer to sense where understanding of word or phrase or

language functions are not learned but acquire. The simplest way to describe it is when you encounter the word or phrase or language functions and you do not and cannot explain it in words but to a certain degree you understand its meaning, use and appropriateness to context.

It is as Socrates said “I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think”. The teaching of English should not be about “teaching’ but to build understanding, comprehensive understanding as to be able to apply it such as a child ‘learning’ language.

Ensuring Comprehensible input in Teaching Second Language Learning

As a language teacher and subsequently also a lifelong learner, all of us seek to make sense of the language limbo using the various learning strategy to comprehend the input that lead to target language acquisition. Therefore, language teacher main objective is to make sure that we facilitate learner to comprehend the target language by varying our teaching style to accommodate the different learner in our class (Davies, 1989).

Below are some simple strategies that language teachers can apply in their classroom to facilitate comprehensible input in learning process.

1. Making sure instruction is comprehensible by using the same or similar instruction phrase accompanied by gestures. They might not know the meaning (yet) but they get the idea of what was expected of them.

There is no prohibition for the use of L1 in instruction if the aim is to be an understandable input. However, to foster comprehensible input, it is advised that teachers introduce language functions such as common phrases in the target language which will be used in a predictable routine thus students may associate the sound, sentence patterns and meaning to the instruction given even though they do not fully understand the instructions word by word. Later on, as their knowledge and grasp of knowledge expanded this sense of knowing will greatly compliment their complete understanding.

2. Teach them to 'guess' the meaning based on the context.

In reading or listening activities, do not give the answer readily to the student when they do not understand or when they asked question about the meaning of certain word or phrase or language functions. Lead the students to look at the words they are familiar with and help them to guess the

meaning. This helped the student to think and harness their sense of understanding that will lead to comprehension.

3. Use diverse media in teaching and learning process

Just as students have different learning style and characteristics, teacher also have different style and characteristics. However, orchestrating comprehensible input in class process may require diverse use of media as well as teaching strategies. Audio-visual, games, movements and storytelling may be some of the readily accessible and available strategies to use in class as to make sure parts if not all of the learning objective can be comprehensible and meaningful to the students.

4. Use visual presentation (picture etc)

Most of the time, the most effective media is visual presentation: picture, graphics, infographics, video clips etc. Students with different learning style and learning pace will benefit in deciphering meaning from these.

5. Have students repeat instruction or concept they are learning with their own words.

Being comprehensible means that students have internalized and develop understanding of instruction and concept. By having students to repeat the instruction or

concepts orally in their own words, we do not only cemented their understanding but it also help us to gauge how thorough their understanding have developed. This will determined whether additional actions need to be taken.

Conclusion

Comprehensible Input is crucial to learning especially language learning. Comprehensible Input allows students to engage in an active processing instead of just being spoon-fed with ready answer. This active processing learning process allows

students to develop better sense of understanding and will allow students to use the language knowledge in a correct and appropriate context better than simply memorizing or by grammar-teaching.

References

- Curtis, S. Fromkin, V. Krashen, S. et.al.(1974). 'Linguistic Development of Genie'. *Language*. Vol. 50, No. 3 (Sept., 1974). Linguistics Society of America
- Davies, E. C. (1989). *Learning Styles and Language Learning Strategies*. Ujung Pandang – Indonesia: Summer Institute of Linguistic.
- Fromkin, V. Robert R. and Nina H. (2007). *An Introduction to Language* (8thEdn). Boston: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Lee, J. F. & VanPatten, B. (2003). *Making communicative language teaching happen*. (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lightbown, P. M. and Nina S. (2011). *How Languages are Learned* (3rdEdn), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Saville-Troike, M. (2006). *Introducing Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stephen Krashen Talk on Language Acquisition (1982?). You Tube Clip. Uploaded by [MarisaConstantinide](#) on

May 30,
2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vh6Hy6El86Q>. Accessed on
Sept2012. Last Accessed
Oct 2012.

Yule, G. (1996). The Study of
Language. Cambridge:
Cambridge University
Press.